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Post-2023 Thailand: Democratic Backsliding from Authoritarian Resilience and Elite Compromise

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Introduction

Despite the electoral success of political parties that opposed military influence in Thailand's 2023 general elections, there has been minimal progress towards establishing a more democratic political system. The prevailing popular demand for democratization was significant in its aspiration to dismantle the legacy of military rule that had dominated the country's political landscape for nearly a decade following the May 2014 coup. Nevertheless, that demand failed to translate into change. First, the Thai electorate's mandate was overturned through interventions by the junta-appointed Senate, the Constitutional Court, and other oversight bodies, which acted collectively to prevent the Move Forward Party (MFP) from coming to power despite its victory in the 2023 general election. Second, a series of elite compromises and power-sharing arrangements among political parties representing diametrically opposed ideological orientations have crowded out the possibility of meaningful structural reform and undermined the principles of accountability that are fundamental to the functioning of a democratic system.

The most visible legacy of military rule—the junta-drafted 2017 Constitution—remains firmly in place and continues to shape political outcomes, not least by empowering unelected bodies to undermine elected representatives through sweeping, and at times arbitrary, interpretations and enforcement of the ethical standards required of office holders. Consequently, in the span of approximately three years following the 2023 general election, Thailand has experienced a succession of three prime ministers, two of whom were dismissed from office due to ethical infractions. The prevailing civil-military relations continue to reflect an asymmetric power structure that has its origins in a history marked by recurrent military interventions in political affairs. In fact, in the context of the resurgence of border tension between Thailand and Cambodia, the military has become more assertive in guiding the government's security agenda and in establishing its autonomy from civilian oversight, particularly in matters pertaining to promotions, appointments, and arms acquisitions. Thailand's civilian leadership has shown little willingness to reassert effective civilian control.

The most recent episodes should not be interpreted as a democratic backsliding, at least not in the strict sense of a democracy sliding backward through the erosion of institutions that once sustained it (Bermeo 2016). In contrast to contexts in which promissory coups or executive aggrandizement subvert institutions such as free and fair elections, the rule of law, and civil liberties, Thailand's current

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predicament is best characterized by the chronic weakness—rather than the weakening—of those institutions within a system that remains dominated by unelected forces. Apart from the revocation of emergency powers and the reestablishment of elections in 2019, Thailand's democratic institutions have not adequately recuperated from the most recent phase of democratic regression that commenced with the 2014 coup—or, as some contend, even predates it to the 2006 coup. In essence, Thailand has yet to regain a reasonably democratic baseline that would make "backsliding" in a traditional sense the central dynamic at play. Instead, the prevailing trajectory indicates an ongoing consolidation of authoritarian resilience, characterized by the entrenchment of rules, norms, and institutional arrangements that cede significant power to unelected actors at the expense of elected ones.

The subsequent discussion will proceed as follows. First, it illuminates the institutional legacies of military rule that persist in exerting a dominant influence on the political landscape, more than a decade and two electoral cycles subsequent to the 2014 coup. Secondly, it analyzes the emergence of elite compromises that now dictate government formation irrespective of electoral mandates and outcomes. The conclusion of the study discusses the implications of these developments as Thailand moves toward another election that is scheduled to take place in February 2026.

Enduring Authoritarian Legacies

Since the end of direct military rule in 2019, pro-establishment forces in Thailand have continued to override electoral mandates, suppress dissent, and leverage judicial mechanism to target political opponents and undermine elected governments. In the two post-coup elections, the parties that won the most seats—Pheu Thai in 2019 and Move Forward in 2023—were impeded from forming a government by the junta-appointed 250-member Senate, which was authorized to vote for the prime minister alongside the 500-member House.

In the political landscape of Thailand, various parties that delineated themselves as diametrically opposed to the prevailing conservative status quo were routinely subject to dissolution. This phenomenon was exemplified by the dissolution of the Thai Raksa Chart Party in 2019, the Future Forward Party in 2020, and most recently, the Move Forward Party in 2024. Two prime ministers, Srettha Thavisin and Paetongtarn Shinawatra, were disqualified by the Constitutional Court on charges of grave ethical misconduct. A significant number of other elected politicians continue to face legal action, including 44 MPs affiliated with Move Forward for supporting a motion to introduce a draft bill to amend the controversial lèse-majesté law. Upon assuming power, elected governments invariably find themselves operating within circumscribed limits. This is due to the fact that unelected bodies reserve the prerogative to scrutinize ministerial appointments on ethical grounds, exercise the veto over major policy initiatives, and enforce adherence to frameworks inherited from military rule, specifically the 20-Year National Strategy.

The termination of the junta-appointed Senate's term in 2024, which coincided with the conclusion of its function in selecting the prime minister in conjunction with the House, initially generated a modicum of optimism. The prospect of a newly formed Senate was widely viewed as an opportunity to reduce the influence of unelected actors, given the Senate's role in overseeing appointments to independent institutions that have been instrumental in the various assaults on democracy. These institutions include the Election Commission, the National Anti-Corruption Commission, the Constitutional Court, and other nominally independent appointed bodies. Many of

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these actors have become pivotal in shaping political outcomes in Thailand since 2006, often in ways that advance conservative interests. However, the method by which the new Senate was selected, and the resulting composition of the chamber, indicated that these expectations were erroneous.

The recently constituted Senate comprises 200 members selected through a complex, multi-stage process in which candidates vote for one another both within and across designated occupational categories. Despite the fact that this Senate no longer plays a role in the selection of the prime minister, it continues to wield significant influence. This influence is evident not only in the appointment process for independent bodies but also in the ability to petition these entities for political intervention. In the 2024 Senate race, candidates associated with Bhumjaithai became the largest bloc in the chamber, despite allegations of widespread vote rigging. This development led to the emergence of the term "blue senators," which refers to the candidates associated with Bhumjaithai. This configuration has enabled Bhumjaithai to wield disproportionate influence over the institutional levers that were previously exclusive to conservative establishment forces. The influence of the group in question was demonstrated when 36 of its senators petitioned the Constitutional Court to rule on the ethical qualifications of then-Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra following the leaked phone call between her and Cambodian Senate President Hun Sen. This led first to the Prime Minister's suspension on July 1 of 2025 and then to her removal from office by the Constitutional Court on August 29 based on ethical violation charges. This outcome may be regarded as a judicial overthrow against the Pheu Thai-led government, thereby paving the way for the formation of a new government under Bhumjaithai leader Anutin Charnvirakul as prime minister. Despite the fact that the Senate is no longer directly appointed by the junta, it paradoxically continues to reproduce the legacies of military rule by inviting unelected bodies to assert themselves over elected governments.

These worrisome patterns persist, at least in part, due to the fact that a significant number of the oversight bodies referenced above maintain substantial powers under the 2017 Constitution. As long as the situation persists, competing political factions will continue to compete for control over these bodies, particularly through the Senate, which wields an effective veto power over appointments to these entities. Ironically, a fragmented, multiparty coalition environment such as the one that emerged after the 2023 general election only intensifies the race to capture oversight bodies. In such a context, political actors within the government are engaged in intense struggles for cabinet posts, budgetary influence, and policy direction. In many cases, these parties find it more effective to build leverage over their rivals—who are simultaneously their coalition partners—by amassing influence over powerful unelected bodies with substantial veto or oversight authority, rather than relying solely on the number of MP seats they hold. Consequently, these institutions have become enmeshed in partisan conflict, their mandates distorted by the strategic imperatives of competing elites. In the course of these developments, state agencies have become embroiled in partisan disputes.

The investigation led by the Department of Special Investigation (DSI) and the Election Commission into allegations of vote-rigging in the 2024 Senate election, for instance, had evolved into a proxy battlefield in the struggle between Pheu Thai and Bhumjaithai for dominance over control of the Ministry of Interior portfolio and the upper house. The upper house, as previously mentioned, retains the authority to endorse appointments to bodies such as the Constitutional Court, the National Anti-Corruption Commission, and the Election Commission itself. In response to the perceived actions of Pheu Thai, which may observers viewed as the catalyst for the DSI's establishment, Bhumjaithai-affiliated senators petitioned the Constitutional Court to intervene. The petitioners

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sought to ascertain whether Deputy Prime Minister Phumtham Wechayachai and Justice Minister Tawee Sodsong had transgressed ethical boundaries by initiating politically motivated investigations. In a similar vein, the protracted Khao Kradong land dispute in Buriram and the Alpine land case in Pathum Thani became politicized by the feud between Pheu Thai and Bhumjaithai, with each side endeavoring to align agencies such as the Land Department, the Ministry of Interior, and the National Anti-Corruption Commission to substantiate their respective claims and discredit their rivals. These dynamics have contributed to highly abusive patterns of politicizing state agencies and drawing supposedly independent oversight bodies into partisan conflict, with the effect of making them even more central players in Thailand's political landscape.

These developments reflect a political environment in which the power of appointed bodies to influence—and at times supersede—elected ones in shaping political outcomes have become increasingly normalized. The durability of this institutional configuration is, of course, attributable to the design of the junta-drafted 2017 Constitution, which has proven exceptionally difficult to amend due to its stringent requirement of a parliamentary majority alongside the support of at least one-third of the Senate. However, the impact of this phenomenon, which involves the entrenchment of a status quo in which unelected institutions preside over elected ones is clearly mediated by the political actors of the day. These actors benefit from and actively reproduce these arrangements. On several occasions, it has been members of parliament themselves who have petitioned the Constitutional Court to rule on the number of referendums are required for a complete constitutional rewrite. This effectively granted the Court the authority to set the pace and scope of constitutional reform, as demonstrated by a recent ruling that explicitly prohibits the establishment of a directly elected constitution-drafting assembly. The institutional legacies of military rule endure, therefore, not only because of the constitutional architecture that enshrines them, but also because elected actors have repeatedly reinforced and legitimized the very constraints that limit their own power. The transition away from military rule, in other words, has not been accompanied by a transition to democracy.

A similar paradox can be observed in the behavior of political parties and the party system. This will be discussed in the next section. Although military-aligned parties were defeated at the polls, key military figures continue to wield significant political influence through elite bargains that safeguard their interests and constrain the reformist potential of electoral outcomes.

Elite Compromises

In the context of a parliamentary democracy, such as Thailand, there is a certain degree of anticipation for the emergence of collusive behavior and post-electoral bargaining among political parties. However, the coalitions that materialized in the aftermath of the 2023 general elections have been characterized by "promiscuous power-sharing" arrangements (Slater and Simmons 2013) and "toxic alliances" (McCargo and Wadipalapa 2024). It is evident that the post-2023 elite compromises have clearly contributed to the dysfunction of Thai democracy through several mechanisms. First, Thai political elites are foregoing democratic reform as the price of sustaining their alliances. Secondly, these alliances of political conveniences have blurred out meaningful differences between parties that voters rely on as heuristics when casting their ballots. Finally, they have undermined accountability—in the sense of depriving voters of the ability to keep parties they oppose out of government and eliminating clear lines of opposition that provide essential checks and balances on those in power (Jatusripitak and Lohatepanont 2025).

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The initial compromise may have emerged even before the 2023 elections, in response to the pronounced power imbalances between elected and unelected forces in Thailand. Pheu Thai's de facto leader, former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, sought to establish a conciliatory relationship with Thailand's conservative establishment to ensure his return after 15 years of self-imposed exile. As part of a deal that was the subject of much speculation and reportedly negotiated in Langkawi, Thaksin is believed to have offered his Pheu Thai Party as a political pawn to block the progressive MFP from power. In exchange for this offer, it is thought that Thaksin would receive leniency in legal proceedings related to cases filed against him while abroad and support from the junta-appointed Senate for Pheu Thai's prime ministerial candidate (McCargo 2024). The arrangement was regarded as a potential avenue for Thaksin to rehabilitate himself in the eyes of the establishment, which had historically sought to dismantle his influence through a series of actions including military coups, dissolution of political parties, judicial interventions, and constitutional engineering. This entailed providing his political party as a vehicle for safeguarding conservative interests from the reformist aspirations that had emerged within the pro-democracy movements of 2020-2021 and were subsequently advanced by the MFP, which had committed to revising the lèse-majesté law in the run up to the 2023 general elections.

After a period of political maneuvering aimed at neutralizing the MFP's victory and preventing its prime ministerial candidate, Pita Limjaroenrat, from assuming office, the agreement was finalized on August 22, 2023, when Thaksin returned to Thailand as Srettha Thavisin, representing Pheu Thai, was elected prime minister with the support of military-affiliated parties and senators. Pheu Thai formed a coalition that excluded the MFP but incorporated parties aligned with the general who had orchestrated the 2014 coup against Thaksin's sister, Yingluck, despite the pledges made by its leaders to the contrary. Subsequently, Thaksin was granted a royal commutation, which reduced his original eight-year prison sentence to a mere one year. Notably, he served six months of this sentence in a VIP room at the police hospital before being granted early release on parole.

This significant compromise endured the subsequent removal of Srettha and his replacement by Thaksin's daughter Paetongtarn in 2024. However, the coalition collapsed in the face of a series of events, including a leaked conversation between Paetongtarn and Cambodian Senate President Hun Sen. This conversation incited widespread nationalist outrage against the Pheu Thai-led government, ultimately leading to Bhumjaithai's withdrawal from the coalition and Paetongtarn's subsequent dismissal by the Constitutional Court. Nevertheless, this aforementioned crisis resulted in the establishment of an even more striking power-sharing arrangement: a minority government agreement between the Bhumjaithai Party and the progressive-leaning People's Party (the successor to Move Forward), despite the pronounced ideological differences between the two parties.

The People's Party's decision to support Anutin as prime minister in September 2025 was justified by its leaders as a strategy to avert a deadlock in the selection of a prime minister—a deadlock stemming from the constitutional design—that could have led to the appointment of an external candidate or even the return of former junta leader, General Prayut Chan-o-cha, as prime minister. Nevertheless, its support for Anutin, conditional on his government dissolving the House within four months of delivering a policy statement to parliament and committing to constitutional reform, effectively amounted to a vote for a candidate who might as well have been openly endorsed by Thailand's establishment. Evidence of this includes the Privy Council's dismissal of Pheu Thai's proposal to dissolve the House, which cleared the way for a prime ministerial selection, as well as the swift dropping of several cases against Anutin and his party in the Constitutional Court, widely seen

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as acting in the interests of the establishment. This arrangement deprived Thailand of a credible opposition, as the main opposition party, the People's Party, was compromised in its role as an effective check on the Anutin-led government due to its objective of extracting concessions from that government, as outlined in the Memorandum of Agreement, signed between the two-party leaders.

As of the present moment, this agreement has also collapsed. During the second reading of the draft constitutional amendment in December 2025, members of parliament (MPs) and senators affiliated with Bhumjaithai voted to impose a requirement that at least one-third of the Senate—which the party currently exerts effective control over—must approve any new constitution. In response, the People's Party declared its intent to initiate a no-confidence motion against Anutin. However, this initiative was subsequently thwarted by Anutin's dissolution of the House later that same day.

In essence, Thai politics makes for strange bedfellows: a vote for Pheu Thai brought its former adversary into government; a vote for a conservative party delivered Thaksin's proxies as prime ministers; and a vote for the progressive party produced a conservative premiership. In every instance, Thai voters ended up with the opposite of what they thought they were choosing. The democratic spirit that animated the 2023 general election has effectively been blunted and sidelined by the compromises required to establish governing coalitions and maintain elite cohesion.

While the long-term implications of these elite arrangements are not yet fully elucidated, they have already reshaped the party system by diluting partisan differences and hollowing out party identities, along with the core ideological distinctions that once structured electoral choices. This includes the divides between pro- and anti-Thaksin and pro- and anti-military camps, which have collapsed into elite consensus and left voters stranded without parties that clearly reflect their convictions (Jatusripitak and Lohatepanont 2025). This dynamic has the potential to adversely impact the foundations of democracy, fostering distrust in political parties and eroding public confidence in the efficacy of electoral representation. Of greater significance is the fact that the compromises made in exchange for maintaining these alliances have effectively rendered the prospects of implementing critical reforms unfeasible. Constitutional reform is of the utmost importance, yet it has faced repeated delays due to disagreements among coalition partners over referendum requirements, restrictions on amendments to sections concerning the form of government and the monarchy, and the composition and selection of a constitution-drafting assembly.

Alongside constitutional reform, other critical reforms have stalled. Notably, lèse-majesté reform[1] has become politically untenable following a ruling by the Constitutional Court that the Move Forward Party's proposed amendment constituted an effort to subvert the constitutional monarchy. Furthermore, military reform has been effectively abandoned, as civilian governments persist in accommodating the interests of parties with ties to military figures and the entrenched prerogatives of Thailand's security forces. This dynamic is particularly salient in the context of the ongoing border conflict between Thailand and Cambodia. This conflict has decimated what little remained of civilian leaders' control over Thailand's security apparatus and has emboldened the Thai military to act with greater autonomy, now that it enjoys renewed popularity and legitimacy, especially in shaping defense policy and operational decisions related to the border conflict. This has

[1] The protests of 2020-2021, led predominantly by youth movements, brought unprecedented calls for reform of the monarchy. In response, numerous activists were arrested under lèse-majesté and computer crime charges, with many denied bail, and some subjected to extended pre-trial detention. These prosecutions have continued with a profound chilling effect on the exercise of rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly.

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led to a further escalation of the conflict, despite the establishment of a ceasefire agreed in October 2025. The civilian-led government is currently unable to take significant action, as it is largely dependent on the actions of the military, which is widely regarded as acting legitimately in defense of national sovereignty and operating within its purview over border security.

Conclusion

In the aftermath of 2023, Thailand has witnessed the emergence of a system that has adapted to electoral competition, albeit with the aim of blunting its democratic potential. This adaptation has been achieved through the imposition of institutional constraints and the cultivation of elite consensus, thereby ensuring the perpetuation of unelected powerholders' dominance within Thai society. If this phenomenon is to be characterized as democratic backsliding, it should be understood as backsliding driven by authoritarian resilience rather than through the more familiar pathways through which democratic institutions are undermined. The aforementioned authoritarian resilience manifests in three conspicuous ways.

First, elections have been effectively decoupled from government formation. Interventions by unelected institutions, together with the emergence of ideologically contradictory coalitions that betray voter mandates, have severed the link between electoral outcomes and the composition of government. Ballots no longer determine who governs; instead, elite bargaining and endorsement from the conservative royalist-military establishment ultimately shape government formation and, in turn, the policy choices that follow. Second, political parties and elected leaders face chronic insecurity in an institutional environment that continues to empower unelected bodies to exercise broad discretion over questions of ethics and legality, which can lead to party dissolution or removal of political office holders at any time. Third, the normalization of punitive actions against elected representatives and the precedents established by court rulings have tightly constrained the scope of reform and agenda-setting, with clear red lines placing key issues beyond democratic contestation and civilian authority. These patterns suggest that Thailand's democratic dysfunction today is not the result of institutional decay, but rather of an institutional design deliberately crafted to blunt democratization and prevent democracy from consolidating and functioning effectively in the first place.

For Thai democracy, the road ahead necessitates a comprehensive examination of the institutional legacies of military rule and the elite compromises that perpetuate these legacies. However, at this juncture, neither constitutional reform nor another election appears to be a probable catalyst for such a transformation. The initiative to establish a directly elected constitution-drafting assembly has been rejected, and the draft constitutional amendment that would facilitate a constitutional rewrite did not pass before the House was dissolved. This dissolution has triggered a new election conducted under the same institutional constraints as before, but in a climate marked by heightened nationalism over the Thailand-Cambodia border conflict and a deepening distrust of political parties and their ideological commitments. In essence, Thailand may be approaching yet another electoral process in which Thai voters once again find themselves constrained within a system where their choices hold far less influence than the machinations of elites and unelected entities, and where the assurance of democratic representation is continuously postponed. In this sense, Thailand is not confronting the erosion of an established democracy; rather, it is grappling with the persistent failure of democracy to emerge in the first place.■

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